DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 510 CS 213 453

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TITLE When You Aren't and They Are.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Student Needs; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Personal Experiences; Teacher Awareness

ABSTRACT

The lack of separation, in the mind of the teacher, of self from student is a common, though dangerous, phenomenon. The underlying assumption is that teachers and their students are really the same, but that students are betraying that supposed sameness by not performing satisfactorily. But students, being different from their teachers, have different needs, and the recognition of this is the key insight that allows teachers to truly teach. Personal experiences, including a daughter's disclosure to her mother that she is a lesbian, a Vietnamese medical student's holding to ethnic beliefs, and a realization that "Hiawatha" is a sentimental and demeaning picture of Indians, function as epiphanies of awareness of the otherness of human beings. In the light of such personal revelations, teachers should become more aware of their limited perspectives. At the same time, they can focus more attention on the uniqueness of their students and the nature of these student's true identities and needs. (HB)

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When You Aren't and They Are

When I was a little girl growing up in Central Wisconsin, I had already begun my teaching career. In my back yard, I arranged slightly younger friends at a table in front of me, three or four at a time, and I set them to reading and writing lessons. Their passive obedience was complete (after all, it was my table, my lemonade pitcher, my selection of Roy Rogers comic books), and I guided them firmly through the sentence, the paragraph, the general content. Even when I, as a teen-ager, expanded my teaching horizons to the St. Paul's Methodist Sunday School and suffused the pre-schoolers with Jesus cards and the words to hymns, my confidence in my own way of doing things was complete. After all this, my college practice teaching seemed a little silly, though well meant. In my own mind, I had been a professional for years.

I used to think of this premature professionalism as stemming from my personal self-confidence, something that was rooted in me alone. That it grew from and was supported by assumptions I held toward my students was an idea that took me years to recognize. Naturally, I had thought about the nature of my students with intense concentration, but when I did so, I assumed, on a level so fundamental that it aroused not even the mildest questioning, that anything I did with them or to them was instinctively right because I knew my own mind, and they were all exactly like me.

This lack of separation of self from student is a very pleasant,

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though dangerous, state. We in the profession of teaching disguise its reality by complaining about our students' lack of competence, their disorderly habits, their inability to think. But the assumption underlying all this superficial denegration is that we and our students are really the same, and they are somehow betraying that supposed sameness by not performing as we ourselves would were we on the other side of the desk. This allows the teacher a superiority that has the patina of democracy. Because of this illusion, we do not feel an obligation to struggle to understand any separate orientations our students might have. After all, aren't they the same as we are?

But the needs of our students are not necessarily the same as our own simply because we are not the same people. For a teacher to be unable to recognize this fact means that teaching becomes a one-person performance which goes on as if the audience had no separate identity of its own. The necessary recognition of differing orientations and needs among our students is the key insight that allows us as teachers to truly teach, not simply cookie-cut our assumptions into students. Gaining this insight has been one of the most important intellectual stepping-stones of my classroom commitment.

My first true experience of recognizing the "other" in this manner came when my daughter went off to college. She had been accepted at Brown, which was delighted to have a student from North Dakota to complete their demographic sweep. Two nights before she left, Martha sat down with me in our living room and said she had something to tell me. I wasn't naive, and this beautiful, androgynous-appearing child whose warmest attachments had always been to women was clearly about to tell me what some part of me had guessed all along.

Martha teases me now that I sent her off to Brown warning her not to be terribly conspicuous about being a lesbian, not to commit herself to anything before she was sure. I have no memory of this fallibility, of course. What I do remember is that she spent her freshman year marching for a whole collection of causes: anti-CIA, pro-women's rights, anti-racial discrimination, pro-freedom of choice. During her sophomore year, I admired her work as an "out" lesbian who was women peer counselor in the dorm, and her "otherness" in this sense became a part of her prideful individuality as an adult. Though this did not take place in my classroom, Martha was the same age as my students, and the lesson carried over. My daughter was not me, despite our matching upper teeth and narrow bodies. She had other needs and deserved to be regarded as someone separate. She would learn better that way, and so would I.

As time passed, I began to think of Martha's growing individuation as a kind of epiphany, a burst of enlightenment that changed my view. However, epiphanies are not necessarily single. Once my awareness had been sharpened, I found myself being reminded through small, intense experiences of the necessity for not assuming that everyone thought as I did, especially in matters of custom and canon. Even as I was teaching, I was being taught.

My next epiphany took place in Texas, where our family had moved after North Dakota. I had become friends with a number of Vietnamese fishermen's families until I found myself doing unofficial social work for most of my week. In the course of wrestling my way through the medical system, the welfare system, the police system, I had called upon several of the Vietnamese medical students at the medical school in Galveston to help me with translating. They also explained things to me that I

didn't understand and that the fishermen didn't have enough English to clarify.

"What is that red spot I see between their eyebrows when they've got a bad cold?" I asked Sy Le one night at a party. Sy was a gracious young man, one of the 1975 group of refugees when Saigon had fallen.

"It's to let out the bad winds."

"What?" Another quaint custom, I thought, sipping my wine.

"When you're sick," Sy went on, "you go to the Chinese doctor in Houston." His voice was low but firm, and he had set his wine glass on the coffee table so his hands would be free to help with the words. "The Chinese doctor rubs your forehead until he has made a red spot to let out the bad winds. Soon there's no more pain and your sickness goes away."

Sy was a sophomore medical student, getting ready to enter his clinical third year. His accent was already disappearing. I was feeling a little mischievous, ready to tease him with the information he had just given me. "And when you have your M.D., Sy," I said, "and you're in practice, will you rub the foreheads of <u>your</u> patients?"

As so often when teachers ask questions, I had the answer I expected firmly in my mind. But what I expected wasn't what I got. "Not for my American patients," Sy said, as matter-of-factly as if I'd asked about the weather. "It wouldn't work for them. But for my Vietnamese patients, of course."

With a flash, I had a vision of Sy in practice. He would do whatever worked for each individual patient. And some things didn't work for everyone. It wasn't a matter of universal truth, a rigid pseudo-democratic assumption that we were all the same. Each person owned his or her own

differences. One should regard them, not assume they weren't there. Sy, standing with his glass again in his hand, his eyes slightly lowered out of respect for my status, had taught me that.

My third epiphany involved neither lesbians nor Vietnamese. Here the definition of the canon provided the structure. My son, mildly dyslexic, was a junior in high school in Galveston and having his usual difficulties with English classes. In the course of the year, I had gotten to know his English teacher very well, a pleasant woman, younger than I was, conservative in her views but reasonably understanding. As the year reached its conclusion and it became clear that Ben would earn the desired B grade, I invited his teacher out for dinner--in celebration, though neither of us phrased it in that way. It was over the flounder in the seafood restaurant that the next revelation came.

"I have trouble with the literature texts they publish nowadays," Miss Harper said. I called her Jean, but thought of her as Miss Harper, unable to resolve the discrepancy between the parental seniority I was trying to project and the subservience I felt at my core as long as Ben's academic fate rested in her hands. "They include such strange new things," she continued. "Not what I read in college."

"It's true that things change." I had become expert on the non-committal but wise remark. Even my fish-deboning technique showed it in the neatly classified piles of bone and flesh on my plate.

"So many of my old favorites aren't included any more. I miss that."

"I guess you're right. The publishers go their own way without regard for the teachers."

"For instance." Miss Harper smiled, as if acknowledging the tender charm of her preference. "I miss 'Hiawatha'. No one publishes

that any more. I memorized 50 lines of it when I was in school, and Longfellow has always been a favorite of mine. Students are so interested in Indians too, even in high school English classes."

"You're right." Pictures were forming in my mind, and, yes, a breeze of nostalgia. "I liked to read Indian literature too when I was a child. 'Hiawatha' had a lot of power." Over my dismembered flounder, I started to recite, "By the shores of Gitchee Gumee/ By the shining Big Sea Waters/ Stood the wigwam of Nokomis..." The words sailed out of the depths of my memory.

Then I stopped. Miss Harper's eyes became puzzled at the sudden silence. But for a stunning moment, clear and painful, I realized that in some bizarre way, held since childhood, the image closest to my heart of Native Americans was this ghastly Gitchee Gumee, this sentimental wigwam, this shade of a time when Indian issues could be dismissed with the childhood slush of what was, and I knew it, a terrible, offensive poem. I, who had taught on an Ojibway Reservation, who had felt the power there even in the squalor, I who had read Momaday and Silko, was still holding as my primary imagine of Native American nature a silly picture invented to demean and infantilize. I had made them white, like me. I had been unable to separate them from myself. And, in the classroom, I would have done the same thing without even being aware of the significance of my actions.

Of course, no one of these experiences revolutionized my teaching. I was already competent in the classroom, working on the individualizing of students, alert to their needs, trying to stay aware of both what I was and what I wasn't. But now the bad winds and Gitchee Gumee together formed a kind of refrain that sang behind the words as I lectured and

discussed. I was not such an all-knowing person. I operated according to much that ran deep and untouched beneath my conscious mind. I needed to pay special attention to whom I taught and the true identities of those students. I had to leave the old tender assumptions of unity behind.

Not surprisingly, Martha was the one who put it all together for me, and in a language with which I was totally familiar. We were visiting together, and I was engaged in a passionate soliloquy about some aspects of my teaching. Martha, a Brown graduate now, poised and gracious, secure in her lesbian sexual orientation and in other parts of her life, listened to me talk about my enlightened techniques, the plans I was making for the freshmen the next time around. "If I can just get them to straighten out their pronouns," I exclaimed. "They have so much trouble getting the antecedents right. They'll talk about one member of a couple and say 'they' as if they were referring to both members. They can't figure out that 'he' or 'she' isn't the same as a plural."

"Mom," Martha said, smiling. Maturity had brought increased tolerance for the flaws of her elders. "You remember, not all couples are 'he' and 'she'."

And of course she was right.